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Hanuman's Devotion: Conversations of Faith and Service

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Abstract

This paper reads the principal conversations between Rama and Hanuman in the Valmiki Ramayana, from their first meeting at Rishyamuka in the Kishkindha Kanda to Hanuman's decision in the Uttara Kanda to remain on earth for as long as the story of Rama is told. Taking Valmiki as its main text and turning to Tulsidas's Ramcharitamanas at several points for comparison, it follows two ideas through these exchanges, bhakti or devotion and seva or service, and argues that in Hanuman the two cannot really be separated. His devotion is never passive, and his action is never for himself. The paper also attends to the other side of the relationship, which is less often discussed, that is the gratitude of Rama and his repeated admission that he cannot repay what Hanuman has done for him. Two brief comparisons with Western texts, Virgil's Aeneas and Augustine's Confessions, are used to bring out what is distinctive in Hanuman's idea of duty and of rest. The paper also notes the places where popular retellings of these episodes differ from the text of Valmiki, since the differences are often instructive in themselves.

Keywords: Hanuman; Valmiki Ramayana; Ramcharitamanas; bhakti; seva; devotion; Karma Yoga

Introduction

On any Tuesday in North India, and on Saturdays as well, the small Hanuman temples that stand at street corners and under peepal trees are crowded from early morning. People stop on the way to work, offer a little sindoor or a laddoo, and recite the Hanuman Chalisa, very often from memory and very often quickly, because the bus is coming. A great many of these people have never read Valmiki and may never do so. But they know who Hanuman is, and they know what he stands for, and if one asked them they would probably say it in a single word, which is bhakti. Philip Lutgendorf, whose study of Hanuman is one of the most thorough in English, has traced how this monkey-god of the Ramayana came over the centuries to be one of the most widely worshipped figures in all of Hinduism, and anyone who has walked through an Indian town will not find that hard to believe.

This paper is about where that idea of Hanuman comes from. I want to look closely at the conversations between Rama and Hanuman in the Valmiki Ramayana, because it is in these exchanges, more than in his great feats, that we see what his devotion actually consists of. I will also turn at several points to the Ramcharitamanas of Tulsidas. In a separate paper on the Manas I have looked at the natural world of that text, and I mentioned there that I had written about Hanuman elsewhere. This is that paper. The Manas is, for most people in the Hindi-speaking

world, the Ramayana they actually know, and it would be strange to write about Hanuman's devotion without it, since Tulsidas gives that devotion its most tender expression.

Two words will come up again and again, and it is worth being clear about them at the start. Bhakti is usually translated as devotion, but the English word is a little too mild. In the Indian tradition bhakti means a giving up of one's own will into the will of God, a love so complete that the self more or less stops being the point. Seva means service, and specifically service that asks for nothing back. What is interesting about Hanuman, and what I think makes him so different from the usual picture of a devotee sitting quietly in prayer, is that in him these two cannot be pulled apart. He is almost always shown with folded hands, and yet he is almost never still. His love for Rama shows itself entirely through what he does. One can put it as a kind of paradox: a will that has been given up completely, and yet is busier and stronger than anyone else's in the epic.

I should say, as I have said before in my writing, that I come to this text as a Hindu and not as an outsider, and Hanuman is not for me only a literary character. I do not think this needs to stand in the way of a careful reading, and in some places I think it helps. But the reader should know it.

I will also, in two places, set Hanuman beside figures from Western literature, Virgil's Aeneas and the Augustine of the Confessions. My purpose is not to suggest that they are the same, because they are not. It is rather that a comparison sometimes shows us what we had stopped noticing in our own tradition. With that said, let us begin where Valmiki begins, on a hillside in Kishkindha.

Recognition: The First Meeting (Kishkindha Kanda)

Rama and Lakshmana have lost Sita, and their search has brought them south to the Pampa lake, near the Rishyamuka hill where Sugriva, the exiled monkey king, is hiding from his brother Vali. Sugriva sees two armed men approaching and is afraid that Vali has sent them. So he sends his minister Hanuman to find out who they are, and Hanuman goes down disguised as a wandering mendicant (Kishkindha Kanda 2–3).

What happens next is one of the most charming passages in Valmiki, and one that is not quoted nearly enough. Hanuman speaks to the two brothers with great courtesy, praising them and asking who they are. And Rama, instead of answering him directly, turns to Lakshmana and talks about the way Hanuman speaks. He says, in effect, that nobody could speak like this without having mastered the Vedas:

*Nanrigveda-vinitasya nayajurveda-dharinah,
Nasamaveda-vidushah shakyam evam vibhashitum.*
(Kishkindha Kanda 3)

One who has not been trained in the Rigveda, who does not hold the Yajurveda in memory, who does not know the Samaveda, could not speak in this way.

Rama goes on to say that Hanuman must have studied grammar thoroughly, since in all that he has said there is not a single wrong word, that his face and eyes and brow show no fault while he speaks, and that a king who had such a messenger would succeed in everything. It is a lovely moment because it is so unexpected. The first thing Rama recognises in Hanuman is not his strength, which we will hear a great deal about later, but his speech, his learning and his manners.

And it is worth remembering this, because in the popular picture Hanuman is mostly muscle. In Valmiki he enters the story as a scholar.

Tulsidas tells the same meeting quite differently, and the difference tells us something. In the Manas it is Hanuman who does the recognising. He comes in the guise of a brahmin, asks the brothers who they are, and as soon as Rama tells him, he knows his Lord:

Prabhu pahichani pareu gahi charana,

So sukh Uma jai nahin barana.

(Kishkindhakanda 2)

Recognising his Lord, he fell and clasped his feet; that joy, O Uma, cannot be described.

Shiva, who is narrating this part of the story to Parvati, simply gives up trying to describe it. And a little later Rama raises Hanuman up and tells him something that devotees have treasured ever since, that Hanuman is twice as dear to him as Lakshmana. He then explains what he means by a true devotee:

So ananya jaken asi mati na tarai Hanumant,

Main sevak sacharachar roop swami bhagavant.

(Kishkindhakanda, Doha 3)

He alone is undivided in devotion, Hanuman, whose understanding never wavers from this: I am the servant, and the Lord is all that moves and does not move.

I would suggest that this single doha holds the whole idea of the present paper in two lines. The devotee is a servant, and the master he serves is not only Rama standing in front of him but the entire world, moving and unmoving. Seva to God and seva to the world are the same seva. Hanuman will spend the rest of the epic living this out.

So we have two poets telling the same meeting, and in one the Lord recognises the devotee, while in the other the devotee recognises the Lord. I do not think we need to choose between them. Put together, they say something true about bhakti, which is that the recognition goes both ways. And from this first meeting Hanuman's loyalty begins quietly to shift. He came down the hill as Sugriva's minister. He goes back up it as Rama's servant, though he will go on serving Sugriva faithfully as well, for as long as Sugriva's cause and Rama's are the same.

Bhakti in Action: The Alliance and the Ring (Kishkindha Kanda)

It is Hanuman who brings Rama and Sugriva together, and in Valmiki he does it with a very practical touch. He lights a fire with two sticks, and the two exiles walk around it and swear friendship with the fire as their witness (Kishkindha Kanda 5). Rama promises to deal with Vali, and Sugriva promises to help find Sita. It is a political alliance, and there is no point pretending otherwise. Sugriva wants his throne and his wife back, and Rama needs an army. But Hanuman seems to understand from the start that something more than politics is happening, and this is clearest not at the alliance itself but some months later.

Vali is killed, Sugriva is crowned, and the rains arrive, during which nothing can be done. When the rains end, however, Sugriva does not move. He has his kingdom now, and he has given himself over to pleasure, and he seems to have more or less forgotten his promise. It is Hanuman who goes

to him and reminds him, respectfully but quite firmly, that a king who forgets a friend's service at the time it is needed loses both his friend and his good name (Kishkindha Kanda 29). This is a side of Hanuman's seva that is easy to miss. Service is not always pleasant agreement. Sometimes it means telling one's own king what he does not want to hear, and Hanuman does this without any loss of humility at all.

When the search parties finally set out in the four directions, Rama does something small that tells us a great deal. He takes his signet ring, engraved with his name, and he gives it to Hanuman, and to nobody else, so that Sita will know the messenger has really come from him (Kishkindha Kanda 44). Hanuman has not done anything yet. He has not crossed any ocean. But Rama has already decided whom he trusts, and this quiet gesture is, I think, the real beginning of the mission as far as Hanuman is concerned. The trust comes first, and the leap comes later.

Here I would like to bring in the first of my two comparisons. Virgil's Aeneas is also a hero defined by duty. His constant epithet in the Aeneid is *pious*, which means something like dutiful, and his duty is to the gods, to his father, whom he carries out of burning Troy on his shoulders, and to a city in Italy that does not yet exist. But what I find most telling about Aeneas is how much his duty costs him, and how little he wants it. In Carthage he falls in love with Dido, and when the gods order him to leave, he tells her, in one of the saddest lines in Latin poetry, "*Italiam non sponte sequor*" (Aeneid 4.361), I do not go to Italy of my own free will. For Aeneas, duty and desire pull in opposite directions, and he follows duty and is unhappy.

There is nothing like this in Hanuman. One searches the Ramayana in vain for a moment where he wishes he were somewhere else. What Rama wants and what Hanuman wants are simply the same thing, and so his duty is never a burden that he carries against his own heart. This is, to my mind, the real difference between *pietas* and *bhakti*, and it is why Hanuman can serve endlessly without ever seeming tired or bitter. He is not obeying. He is loving, and the obeying follows from it.

Shraddha: The Leap to Lanka (Kishkindha and Sundara Kanda)

It is usually imagined, and very often painted, that Rama stood on the seashore and sent Hanuman off across the ocean. In Valmiki this is not quite what happens, and the actual scene is, if anything, more moving. The southern search party, led by Angada, has wandered for months without finding Sita. Their time is up, and they sit down on the shore of the ocean in despair, some of them talking of starving themselves to death rather than going back to Sugriva empty-handed. It is only when the old vulture Sampati tells them that Sita is held in Lanka, a hundred yojanas across the sea, that the question becomes who can possibly jump that far. One by one the monkeys say how far they can go, and none of them can go far enough.

Hanuman sits apart through all of this and says nothing. And it is Jambavan, the old king of the bears, who goes to him and reminds him of who he is, of his birth as the son of the wind, and of the strength he has forgotten that he has (Kishkindha Kanda 66). Only then does Hanuman rise and begin to grow. Tulsidas gives Jambavan's words a line that is now among the best known in the whole *Manas*:

*Kavan so kaj kathin jag mahin,
Jo nahin hoi tat tumh pahin.
Ram kaj lagi tava avatara,
Sunatahin bhayau parbatakara.
(Kishkindhakanda 30)*

What task in all the world is so hard that it cannot be done by you, my son? You were born for Rama's work. Hearing this, he grew to the size of a mountain.

What I find so striking here is that Hanuman's strength comes back to him through remembering his purpose. It is not that he is told he is strong. He is told what he is for, and the strength follows. This is perhaps as close as the epic comes to saying, in so many words, what shraddha means. Faith here is not belief in something one cannot see. It is a kind of remembering of oneself in relation to God, and from it a power arises that was there all along.

On the way across, Hanuman meets three obstacles, and they are worth taking one at a time (Sundara Kanda 1). The first is not really an obstacle at all. The mountain Mainaka rises out of the sea and offers him a place to rest, out of gratitude to his father the wind. Hanuman touches the mountain politely and goes on. Tulsidas puts his reason into a single line:

*Hanuman tehi parsa kar puni kinh pranam,
Ram kaju kinhe binu mohi kahan bishram.
(Sundarakanda, Doha 1)*

Hanuman touched it with his hand and bowed to it, and said: until Rama's work is done, where is there any rest for me?

Here I want to bring in my second comparison, because this line has always reminded me of the opening of Augustine's Confessions. Augustine begins with a prayer, and in its first paragraph he writes that "inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te" (Confessions 1.1), our heart is restless until it rests in you. For Augustine the soul is unquiet and searching, and peace is something it reaches at the end, when it finally comes to God. Hanuman's line turns this almost exactly around. His heart is not restless at all. It is completely at rest in Rama, and has been since the hillside at Kishkindha. It is his body that refuses to rest, because there is work to be done. Augustine's soul is restless until it finds God. Hanuman's soul has found God, and that is precisely why he cannot sit still. I do not want to make too much of this, but I think it says something real about the difference between a devotion that is a search and a devotion that is a service.

The second obstacle is Surasa, the mother of serpents, whom the gods send to test him. She blocks his way and insists that he must enter her mouth. Hanuman grows larger, and she opens her mouth wider, and so on, until suddenly he makes himself as small as a thumb, darts into her mouth and out again before she can close it, and bows to her. She is delighted and blesses him. Hanuman could certainly have fought her. He chose to be clever instead, and polite, and I think Valmiki wants us to see that his intelligence is as much a part of his service as his strength.

The third is Simhika, a demoness who catches creatures flying over the sea by seizing their shadows. With her there is no cleverness and no courtesy. Hanuman enters her body and tears her apart from within. I am reading somewhat freely here, but it is hard not to see in these three a kind

of order. Rest, which is the temptation of comfort, is gently refused. A test is passed with wit and humility. And something that only wants to drag one down by one's own shadow, which we might call doubt or despair, is destroyed outright. The ocean in this reading is every distance that lies between a devotee and the work he has been given, and the leap is what faith looks like when it moves.

Seva: The Message to Sita (Sundara Kanda)

Lanka is enormous, golden and heavily guarded, and Hanuman searches it through the night, shrinking himself to the size of a cat so as not to be seen. He goes through Ravana's palace and his women's quarters, and there is a passage in Valmiki where he worries that he has done something wrong merely by looking at sleeping women, and then reasons that his mind was not disturbed and that one has to look among women to find a woman. It is a very human moment, and I mention it because it shows how carefully his conscience works even in the middle of the mission.

He finds Sita at last in the Ashoka grove, thin and grieving, surrounded by rakshasis. And here his first concern is not to frighten her. A monkey suddenly appearing and speaking might seem to her like another of Ravana's tricks. So he sits in the tree above her and quietly begins to recite the story of Rama, from the beginning, until she looks up (Sundara Kanda 31). Only when she is ready does he come down and give her the ring. Tulsidas, as usual, makes the moment simpler and more tender. In the Manas Hanuman drops the ring into her lap from the tree, and she takes it up with joy, and then he speaks:

*Ram dut main matu Janaki,
Satya sapath karunanidhan ki.
(Sundarakanda 13)*

I am Rama's messenger, Mother Janaki; I swear it truly by the Ocean of Compassion.

Mother is the word he uses, and one should pause on it. Hanuman never thinks of himself in this scene as a hero who has found the lost princess. He is a child who has found his mother, and his whole manner, the patience and the gentleness and the care not to frighten her, comes from that. Then there is a small exchange in Valmiki that I find very revealing. Hanuman, seeing how she suffers, offers to carry Sita back across the ocean on his back, that very day (Sundara Kanda 37). It is a generous offer, and he could probably do it. But Sita refuses. She says she will not willingly touch the body of any male other than her husband, and more than that, that it must be Rama himself who comes and defeats Ravana and takes her back, because anything else would not befit his honour. Hanuman accepts this at once and does not argue. This matters a great deal. Seva in Hanuman is not a matter of doing whatever one thinks best for someone. It is a service that respects the dharma of the one being served, even when that means doing less than one could. She gives him her jewel, the chudamani, to take back to Rama, and he goes.

Before he goes, of course, he lets himself be captured, speaks to Ravana to his face, and then burns Lanka with his own tail. I have written about the burning of Lanka in my paper on the Manas, where Tulsidas has the forty-nine winds join the fire at God's prompting, so I will not repeat it

here. I will only say that even this act of destruction is part of the message. Ravana now knows that Rama has a servant who can do this, and that the servant is only the servant.

Rama's Gratitude on Hanuman's Return (Yuddha Kanda)

When Hanuman returns and tells Rama that Sita is alive, and gives him the jewel, Rama's response at the beginning of the Yuddha Kanda is one of the quieter and more beautiful passages in the epic. He praises what Hanuman has done as something nobody else on earth could have done. And then he becomes troubled, because he realises that he has nothing to give Hanuman that would be worthy of it. He is an exile in the forest, without a kingdom and without wealth. So he does the only thing he can:

*Esha sarvasvabhutas tu parishvango Hanumatah,
Maya kalam imam prapya dattas tasya mahatmanah.*

(Yuddha Kanda 1)

This embrace, which is all that I have, I now give, at this time, to the great-souled Hanuman.

And he takes Hanuman in his arms. I find it impossible to read this without being moved. The Lord of the worlds stands in the forest with nothing to offer, and offers himself.

Tulsidas takes the same moment even further, and here the Manas becomes almost unbearable in its tenderness. Rama tells Hanuman that no god, man or sage has ever done him such a service, and then he says:

*Suni sut tohi urin main nahin,
Dekheun kari bichar man mahin.*

(Sundarakanda 32)

Listen, my son, I have thought about it in my heart, and I can never be free of my debt to you.

God says to his servant that he is in his debt. And Hanuman, hearing this, falls at Rama's feet in a kind of panic of love, crying out to be saved. When Rama raises him and asks him how he managed to burn Lanka, Hanuman gives an answer that is both humble and very funny:

*Sakhamrig kai bari manusai,
Sakha te sakha par jai.*

...

*So sab tava pratap Raghurai,
Nath na kachhu mori prabhutai.*

(Sundarakanda 33)

The greatest skill a monkey has is to jump from one branch to another. ... All of that was your glory, Lord of the Raghus; none of it was any power of mine.

A monkey jumps from branch to branch, that is all. The ocean, the burning city, the slain rakshasas, all of it was Rama's glory and nothing of his own. One can call this humility, and it is, but I think it is also simply the truth as Hanuman sees it. He does not think of his deeds as his. They are what Rama did through him.

What this exchange shows us, and what I think is less often discussed than it should be, is that bhakti in the Ramayana runs in both directions. We are used to hearing about the devotee's love for God. We hear much less about God's gratitude to the devotee. But here it is, plainly, in both poets. Rama does not take Hanuman's service for granted, and he does not treat it as something owed to him. He receives it as a gift, and he is humbled by it. In most heroic literature a hero's deeds are repaid with gold or land or titles. Hanuman is repaid with an embrace and an admission of debt, and it is quite clear from his response that he would not have exchanged it for anything.

Valour: The Herb of Life (Yuddha Kanda)

The episode of the mountain of herbs is probably the most famous thing Hanuman ever did, and it is the one most often shown in calendar art and temple images, with Hanuman flying through the sky with a mountain in one hand. It is also an episode where the popular version and Valmiki's version differ in interesting ways, and here one ought to be honest.

In Valmiki, Hanuman actually makes this journey twice. The first time is after Indrajit, Ravana's son, has struck down Rama, Lakshmana and a great part of the army with a divine weapon. Jambavan, barely alive himself, asks whether Hanuman still lives, because if he does, the army can be saved. He sends Hanuman to a mountain of herbs in the Himalayas, between the Rishabha peak and Kailasa, to bring back four healing plants (Yuddha Kanda 74). The second time is later in the war, when Ravana himself strikes Lakshmana down with a great spear, and the monkey physician Sushena sends Hanuman again, this time to the Mahodaya mountain (Yuddha Kanda 101). Valmiki does not call the mountain Dronagiri. That name comes from the later tradition. And in the Manas, Tulsidas has Lakshmana struck not by Ravana but by Meghnad, which is another name for Indrajit, and adds the demon Kalanemi who tries to delay Hanuman on the way, and the moment where Bharat, in Ayodhya, shoots him down by mistake as he flies overhead.

I do not think any of these differences need to trouble a devotee, and they certainly do not trouble the many people who love this story. But I mention them because the popular version is in a sense a composite of all these tellings, and it is only by separating them that one sees how much the story has grown in the retelling, which is itself a sign of how much people have loved it.

What all the versions agree on is the central and rather wonderful detail. Hanuman reaches the mountain and cannot tell which plants are the right ones. In Valmiki the herbs actually hide themselves from him. And so, rather than waste time searching while Lakshmana is dying, he simply pulls up the whole peak and carries it back. There is something almost comic in this, and the comedy is surely part of the point. Hanuman is learned, as we saw at Kishkindha, but he is also completely practical. If he does not know which herb, he will bring all of them. The service is what matters, and pride in one's own knowledge does not come into it at all.

Tulsidas gives Rama, as he waits through that night beside his brother, a lament that is among the most human things in the Manas:

*Jaun janateun ban bandhu bichohu,
Pita bachan manateun nahin ohu.
(Lankakanda 61)*

Had I known that in the forest I would be parted from my brother, I would not have obeyed even my father's word.

This is Rama, the very image of dharma, who gave up a kingdom without a murmur to keep his father's promise, saying that he would have broken it if he had known what it would cost. It is a moment of real weakness, and it is Hanuman who arrives before dawn with the mountain and makes it unnecessary. Lakshmana breathes the herbs and rises, and the army rises with him. One might say that in this episode Hanuman saves not only Lakshmana but Rama's grief from itself.

Coronation: The Necklace (Yuddha Kanda)

When the war is over and Rama is at last crowned in Ayodhya, there are gifts for everyone who helped. And Valmiki includes one exchange at the coronation that deserves a closer look. Rama gives Sita a necklace of pearls. She takes it off and holds it, and looks at the monkeys and then at her husband, and Rama, understanding her, tells her to give it to the one she is most pleased with, the one in whom there are always energy, steadiness, fame, skill, ability, humility, good judgement, courage, valour and wisdom. And Sita gives it to Hanuman (Yuddha Kanda 128).

Notice that list. Rama does not name Hanuman. He describes him, and Sita knows at once who is meant. And humility is right there in the middle of the list, between ability and good judgement, as if it were just another of his practical qualities, which in a way it is.

There is a well-known later story, which is not in Valmiki but is told everywhere, in which Hanuman bites each pearl of this necklace open and throws it away, and when the court asks him why, he says he is looking for Rama in it, and that what does not have Rama inside it is of no use to him. When someone mockingly asks whether Rama is inside him, then, he tears open his chest, and Rama and Sita are seen seated in his heart. I should be clear that this is a story from the popular tradition and not from the epic. But it is a very good reading of the epic all the same. The people who told it had understood something true about Hanuman, which is that gifts mean nothing to him unless they lead back to Rama.

Remaining: Hanuman's Choice (Uttara Kanda)

The episode that I think matters most for understanding Hanuman, and that is also the one most often misremembered, comes in the Uttara Kanda. The popular version, which I had myself believed for a long time, is that when Rama leaves the world, Hanuman asks to go with him and is refused, and is ordered to stay on earth instead, giving up his own liberation for the sake of dharma. It is a moving story of sacrifice. But Valmiki tells it somewhat differently, and to my mind the difference makes it more moving still.

The real request comes much earlier, after the coronation, when the allies are taking their leave of Rama and going home. Hanuman comes before Rama and asks him for a boon. He does not ask for moksha, and he does not ask to go to heaven. What he asks is this:

*Yavad Ramakatha veera charishyati mahitale,
Tavac charire vatsyantu prana mama na samshayah.*
(Uttara Kanda 40)

For as long as the story of Rama is told upon the earth, O hero, so long may my life remain in this body.

He asks to stay. Nobody has ordered him to. He chooses to remain wherever Rama's story is being told, and for as long as it is told, which is to say, for all time. And Rama, embracing him, grants this and then says something that I think is among the most beautiful things in the whole Ramayana:

*Madange jirnatam yatu yat tvayopakritam kape,
Narah pratyupakaranam apatsv ayati patratam.
(Uttara Kanda 40)*

Let all that you have done for me be absorbed within my own body, O monkey; for a man becomes fit to have favours returned to him only when he falls into misfortune.

What Rama means is that he hopes never to be able to repay Hanuman, because to repay him would mean that Hanuman had fallen into some trouble from which Rama had to rescue him. So he would rather stay in debt forever. It is the same admission we saw in the Manas, I can never be free of my debt to you, but here it has turned into a kind of blessing. Rama also says that for each single service Hanuman has done him he would give his life, and that for all the rest he will simply remain Hanuman's debtor.

Much later, when Rama finally does leave the world, walking into the Sarayu with the people of Ayodhya following him, he speaks to Hanuman once more and reminds him that he has set his heart on living, and asks him not to make his promise false, but to live on happily for as long as Rama's story is told among men (Uttara Kanda 108). So in Valmiki, Rama does not deny Hanuman anything. He holds him, gently, to what Hanuman himself had asked for.

I do not think the popular version is wrong in spirit. It is true that Hanuman stays while the others go, and it is true that this is a kind of giving up. But we should see exactly what he gives up and what he chooses instead. The others go with Rama to his heaven. Hanuman chooses to stay where Rama's story is, and it seems clear that for him that is the same thing, or better. His heaven is not a place. It is wherever the Ramayana is being read, or sung, or acted on a makeshift stage in a village in October. And the tradition has taken him entirely at his word. There is an old verse that is still recited in many homes before a reading of the Ramayana begins:

*Yatra yatra Raghunathakirtanam,
Tatra tatra kritamastakanjalim,
Bashpavariparipurnalochanam,
Marutim namata rakshasantakam.*

Wherever the glory of Rama is sung, there, with folded hands raised to his head and eyes filled with tears, is Maruti, the destroyer of rakshasas; bow to him.

It is a common belief among devotees, and one I grew up with, that whenever the Ramayana is recited, a place should be left for Hanuman, because he is certainly there listening. This is not only a pious habit. It comes straight out of the boon in the Uttara Kanda, and it shows how deeply that one conversation has entered the way ordinary people live.

Conclusion

If we look back over these conversations together, from Kishkindha to the Uttara Kanda, a fairly clear picture emerges. Hanuman's devotion is never something he only feels. It is always something he does. He brokers alliances, reminds a forgetful king of his promise, crosses an ocean, comforts a grieving woman, burns a city, carries a mountain, and through all of it he does not once think of any of it as his own achievement. A monkey jumps from branch to branch, as he says, and that is all.

The Bhagavad Gita has a name for this way of living. It is Karma Yoga, the discipline of action without attachment to its fruits, and its most famous line tells us that "karmany evadhikaras te ma phaleshu kadachana" (Bhagavad Gita 2.47), your right is to the action alone, never to its fruits. Hanuman does not need to be taught this, because he has never lived any other way. And I think the comparison with Aeneas helps us see why it comes so easily to him. For Aeneas, duty is a weight laid on him against his own wishes. For Hanuman, duty and love are the same thing, and so there is nothing to carry. His heart is at rest even while his body never is.

The other thing that emerges, and which I have tried to bring out because it is so often passed over, is that this is a relationship and not a hierarchy only. Rama is not a master receiving what is owed to him. He embraces Hanuman in the forest because he has nothing else to give, tells him in the Manas that he can never be free of his debt, and asks in the Uttara Kanda that he may never be able to repay him. Bhakti in the Ramayana is a love that runs both ways, and the gratitude of God is as much a part of it as the devotion of the servant.

I have also tried in a few places to be careful about the differences between Valmiki and the later tellings, as with the herb of life and with Hanuman's choice at the end. I do not think this takes anything away from Hanuman. If anything, the text as Valmiki wrote it shows us a Hanuman who is more learned, more practical and more free than the one we sometimes carry in our heads. He was not ordered to stay. He asked to.

It is perhaps the best measure of all this that the people crowding into a small Hanuman temple on a Tuesday morning, reciting the Chalisa as the bus approaches, already know most of it without ever having read a page of Valmiki. They know that he is strong and that he is humble. They know that he is always busy and always at peace. And they know that wherever Rama's name is being said, Hanuman is there too, with folded hands, listening.

Note

Translations from the Sanskrit and Awadhi are my own. References to the Valmiki Ramayana give the Kanda and sarga number, following the vulgate numbering used in Hari Prasad Shastri's translation; sarga numbers may differ slightly in other editions. References to the Ramcharitamanas follow the Gita Press edition, with a doha cited by its number and a chaupai by the number of the doha it precedes.

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